DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 725 CS 214 020

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TITLE	Portfolio Programs and Their Assessment Discussed.
PUB DATE	93
NOTE	17p.
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; *Portfolios (Background Materials); *Standardized Tests; *Student Evaluation; Teacher Education; Teacher Student Relationship; Writing Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	Alternative Assessment; Portfolio Approach

ABSTRACT

Educators are expressing the pros and cons of portfolio programs and their assessment. Teachers should be among the policy makers, and teacher-training institutions should bear their share of preparing teachers in all aspects of portfolio programs, including testing. Decade after decade, in both elementary and secondary education, students' writing was judged largely on the mechanics. Many students with poor writing mechanics have something worthwhile to say. Portfolio programs provide students with the opportunity of coming to grips with their own thoughts about certain issues. Even very young children can write factual, imaginative, or humorous material. Throughout many decades witness has been borne to unfair assessment of individual students in standardized tests. Standardized tests have been and continue to be criticized by reputable, concerned people. Alternative tests are needed if there is to be a fair appraisal of all students. The combination of improved standardized tests and a fair-as-possible alternative assessment would provide a more accurate appraisal of students. The seemingly increasing use of student portfolios adds to the need for alternative assessment. Implications include: (1) testing is necessary and should be in keeping with educational goals; (2) teacher training institutions should bear their share of training teachers in portfolio programs; (3) the use of test results to compare schools is questionable; (4) mechanics of writing are best taught in connection with the students' own compositions; and (5) good teaching, which requires teacher-student interaction, is usually reflected in tests based on the goals set. (RS)

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Portfolio Programs and Their Assessment Discussed

Currently, there is considerable concern about assessing portfolio programs. Educators, some well-known are expressing pros and cons at various conventions and in reputable educational periodicals.

It is believed that teachers should be among the policy makers designing the tests. It is further believed that the teacher-training institutions should bear their share of preparing teachers in all aspects of portfolio programs, including testing, and thus enable them to contribute more wisely in the policy making.

Throughout decade after decade, in both elementary and secondary education, and in a wide geographical area, it was observed that students' writing was judged largely on the mechanics, not on the content, though it is the content that would demonstrate their ability to think, to organize, to create -- each among the skills needed in today's workforce.

It was also observed that some of the assigned topics such as "What I Did During Summer Vacation" were a discouragement to a child who had nothing to say and to the child who, if he did, was reluctant to say it. Such practices do not encourage students to write.

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The importance of mechanics is not denied as the mere position of a word in a sentence changes the meaning entirely. Note: The man nearly lost all his money. The man lost nearly all his money. If the teacher gets from the student what he/she is trying to say, the correction can be given, and, because it is

given in a meaningful situation, will probably be remembered more than if it had been given in an isolated textbook lesson.

This is true of spelling as well. If the child wants the word, heavy, for his/her story, it must be spelled **heavy**, not **heavey**. One additional letter destroys the meaning just as the wrong placement of one word in a sentence does.

Experience has taught, too, that many students with poor writing mechanics have something very worthwhile to say, and which would be enjoyed by others more than grammatically correct writing with no story appeal. In both cases, the needed help should be given.

Students must be given to understand that different stories appeal to different audiences, and they must not be discouraged if some people don't seem too interested in their well-written stories, for, undoubtedly, others will.

Consider our newspaper columnists. A few are esoteric writers; others are humorous; some use questionable language; and some are strictly informative and offer household hints, information about health, about investments, etc. Each columnist has his/her "audience".

The cooperation of the content area teachers would provide many more topics on which to write and thus would accommodate a much wider appeal. Throughout the years, it was noted that the writing in the content areas was restricted to writing answers to textbook questions. It is believed that portfolio programs would provide students with the opportunity of coming to grips with

their own thoughts about certain issues.

It is believed that even the very young children can write factual material, imaginative, humorous, etc. Personal experience is convincing in the fact that Viola, a young black girl in the fifth grade, has given a completely accurate account of strawberry picking in the summer heat on a "penny postal" she sent to her teacher decades ago:

> Dear Miss P:
> I pickin strawberries for Mr. Gus. I ony gettin two cent a cup and they is scarce and that not good.
> Yours truly,
> Viola

Strawberries grow low to the ground and can not be picked in an upright position; backbending or crawling are the picker's choices. The intense summer heat, the scarcity of the berries and the low wages are "additional crosses to bear."

Viola was a poor speller, but there is evidence that she cared. She probably copied "strawberries" from the for-sale sign. It is believed that she asked an older picker how to spell "scarce." She referred properly to the containers; a cup was a quart basket. Caring students are usually receptive to help that will improve their writing, and it is felt that they should receive this help.

Little John, a third grade student wrote a story that was well-received and enjoyed by his classmates. He had drawn pictures to accompany his story, "Me and Pop Went Fishin'". Children who had gone fishing with their fathers related readily

to the story and responded with some of their fishing experiences. John's pictures, thought delightful and accurate, sparked considerable interest. A few suggestions for improving his story were offered by classmates and were readily accepted by John who felt they made his good story even better.

The title of John's story which was repeated in the first sentence of the story and followed by other mechanical errors would, probably influence a scorer who put great weight on the mechanics.

Young, D. and Irwin, M. (6) further emphasize the importance of teacher-student interaction. They say, "The most effective use of computer programs is not as stand-alone lessons: teacher-student interaction is essential. Sensitive instructors are needed. Computers cannot teach people to read and write; the human element is essential." They offer a letter from a man to his wife as an example of teacher-student interaction:

> Dear Mary,
> I am seting in front of the computer trying to compose a letter. I have not wrote to you since I left the service in 1946.
>
> Love,
> Kenny

Kenny was satisfied with his message, so his attention was directed toward editing for spelling and grammatical errors. The result of teacher-student interaction is shown in this revision.

> Dear Mary,
> I am sitting in front of the computer trying to compose a letter. I haven't written to you since I

left the service in 1946.

Love,
Kenny

Since Kenny was satisfied with the body of his letter, his instructor didn't interfere. This is commendable because it was **Kenny's letter.**

In regard to story content, talking with students can be very enlightening to teachers. An interesting incident is remembered:

Paulie wrote a story about going hunting in the woods with his BB gun. He came upon a rabbit and expressed his pleasure thus: "Pow! Pow! I got him! Man, did that rabbit take off!"

When his teacher who was inexperienced in hunting with a BB gun asked Paulie, "If you got him, how could he take off so fast?" (His teacher thought he had killed the rabbit.) Indignantly, Paulie replied, "Anybody knows you can't kill with a BB gun, and anybody knows that if you were stung by a pellet from a BB gun, you would 'take off' in a hurry too."

Walter H. MacGinitie (3) has expressed what he considers to be limits of assessment. He says, "Human judgment, subject to both random and systematic errors, plays an obvious part in performance and portfolio assessments."

Differences in human judgments are readily acknowledged. However, it is felt that if the teacher-training institutions bear their share of preparing teachers for their part in performance and portfolio assessments and, if the assessment is based on the cooperation of groups of teachers, and all others

concerned, a reasonably fair assessment can be reached.

MacGinitie acknowledges that portfolios can be very useful in assessment because they can relate assessment closely to instruction and serve the important function of encouraging the teacher and student to record significant observations of the students' successes and difficulties. He adds, however:

> But if portfolios are to be used to arrive at a rating or score, a great deal of time and knowledge must be devoted to planning and assembling the collections and to designing and carrying out the procedures for scoring them.

Throughout many decades witness has been borne to unfair assessment of individual students in standardized tests. Some examples follow:

In a multiple-choice test, a virtual non-reader using a "hit-or-miss" method has been know to receive a score which was in no way compatible with his/her lack of reading ability.

Mary Ann, a beautiful young girl from a caring family was left-handed. Her grandfather had bought her a lovely ring to wear on her right hand to remind her that she was to use that hand. Many Ann's sensitivity compounded her problems. She had extreme difficulty learning to read, and was still doing poorly in seventh grade. Finally, a knowledgeable, experienced teacher who had specialized in the teaching of reading helped her to the extent that she was actually reading and much less frustrated. In a standardized test covering a range of grades, she had eight or ten consecutive answers correct. On a different form of the

same test taken before her reading improvement, she had the same number correct, but they were not consecutive. She had used the "hit-or-miss" method. The score on the pre-test was an inaccurate score. It is felt that studying test patterns is a help in interpreting the test in light of the student concerned.

Many, many decades before portfolio programs were a concern, it was found extremely helpful in arriving at a more accurate assessment of a student's written composition by asking fellow teachers to give their opinions of the stories.

Calfee, R.C. and Perfumo, P. (1) made a survey of portfolio practices. They reported:

> This pattern of responses may appear discouraging at first glance, but there is more here than meets the eye. Alternative assessment and student portfolios tend to appear in combination with other elements: whole language rather than basal readers, cooperative instruction rather than didactic teacher talk, school-based decision making rather than top-down direction, the teacher as professional rather than as civil servant. Many of the survey responses described how externally-initiated projects not related to portfolios evolved into alternative assessment.
>
> Our sense is that this "package" offers the opportunity for fundamental reform in U.S. schooling. The various components are seldom connected in a coherent manner, and so teachers are easily overwhelmed by the multiplicity of demands. The enthusiasm and commitment of portfolio teachers is impressive, but the costs and benefits are disquieting. The portfolio movement seems likely to falter and fail unless it is connected to other supporting components in a manner that meets internal classroom needs (e.g., providing valid data for instructional decisions) while satisfying external policy demands (e.g., providing reliable information for accountability purposes) (Fullan, 1991).

Time, knowledge and cost are acknowledged as deterrents, but

not insurmountable. It is felt that the time and knowledge can be provided and that, if students stand to profit by alternative assessments, the cost is greatly diminished.

Apparently, there are those who are determined not to let any deterrents stand in their way of solving the assessment problem to their satisfaction. A lengthy article, "Putting Portfolios to the Test," by Elizabeth Schultz (5) attests to this fact as she describes Vermont's involvement in the assessment problem of the portfolio project, the brainchild of Vermont Commissioner of Education, Richard Mills.

The call-outs in Schultz's lengthy article give the reader a quick idea of the need for further meeting of the minds in solving the problem. They also state Vermont's determination to do so. The call-outs follow:

> Teachers in Vermont have embraced student portfolios as effective learning tools. But the state's desire to score them and use results to compare schools has many educators frustrated and angry.
>
> Vermont education officials say they are in the portfolio business for the long haul. Some observers, however, worry that the scoring problem may prove intractable and ultimately cripple the whole project.
>
> Some fear that using portfolios to compare schools will undermine their most powerful benefit: demonstrating, for the purpose of guiding further learning, what a student can and cannot do.

Schultz quotes Vermont teacher trainer, Jill Rosenblum:

> Vermont teacher trainer Rosenblum believes that the portfolio project has set up a tension that must be resolved. "We are definitely serving two masters," she says. "I think that most teachers serve the

instructional master first, and the policy makers serve data masters."

Schultz says, "The hope is that, with time, schools will be able to strike a balance between using portfolios as an instructional tool and as a tool for public accountability."

Apparently, there are those who have serious doubts about using portfolios to perform the function of standardized tests and are making their thoughts known. Schultz explains the reasoning.

Donald Graves, a renowned educator, doesn't believe portfolios will ever disappear from the educational landscape; too many teachers left to their own devices would continue to use them in the classroom, mandated or not, scored or not. But he, like others, worries that if portfolios are forced -- like square pegs into round holes -- to perform the function of standardized tests, they will lose their instructional benefits. Or they will simply fail to give the numbers that people are accustomed to and be summarily tossed aside. "Without careful exploration," Graves says, "portfolio use is doomed to failure. They will be tried too quickly, found wanting, and be just as quickly abandoned."

Geof Hewitt, a professional writer, hired by the Vermont Department of Education, was asked by the Commissioner "to pull together a committee of teachers to study what a writing portfolio for 4th and 8th grade students might look like," seems confident that data can be supplied.

Hewitt's committee narrowed the assessment criteria to five: purpose, organization, detail, voice and usage. The rating range was from one to four.

As is often the case, when too many people with opposing views try to accomplish too much, too quickly in too short a time, they don't arrive at satisfactory solutions. This didn't seem to discourage Hewitt, for Schultz concludes her lengthy article with a quote from him: "We realize that we need to figure this out sooner rather than later," Hewitt says. "Eventually, someone is going to lose patience and go back to the bubble test if we can't give them that much desired data. So, they will have their data."

Standardized tests which have been in use for years, and continue to be, have been, and continue to be, criticized by reputable, concerned people. It seems that this gives those favoring alternative testing an opportunity and an incentive to strive for acceptable alternative tests and their scoring. It is believed that this would be in the best interests of all students.

D. Monty Neill and Noe J. Medina (4) are among those offering negative aspects of standardized tests. One negative aspect is offered as an example: "Since knowledge and language are culture-bound, there is no reason to believe that a 'culture-free' test can be constructed." They add:

> Replacing the biases inherent in standardized tests with the biases of individual teachers or schools would not be progress. Therefore, any alternatives to standardized testing must include methods of detecting bias and, when bias is found (as inevitably it will be), procedures to correct it. If, as we anticipate, the information provided by alternatives proves to be far richer, more complex, and more powerful than the information provided by standardized tests, that store of information could be used in ways that harm students. Those most at risk will continue to be minorities and the poor. Proponents of alternatives must guard against their misuse.

A recent communication contained a book review by Maria S. Carlo (2). Carlo reviewed The Construct of Language Proficiency Applications of Psychological Models to Language Assessment, edited by L. Verhoven and J.H.A.L. DeJong. Excerpts from Carlo's review follow:

> The field of language assessment is increasingly

aware of the need for theory-driven assessments: those grounded on theories of language development and on understandings of the cognitive processes underlying skilled performance within language domains. Although some of the studies in the collection do not connect theory and assessment as explicitly as the title of the volume might suggest, many are successful at this. Moreover, those that do not develop this connection describe research that investigates important theoretical questions in the area of language proficiency.

The first section contains several chapters where the primary emphasis is assessment. Mommers and Oud, and van der Leij and Smeets describe research using computers in the assessment of reading skills. With a few exceptions, assessment is addressed indirectly in the second section. Most studies focus on theoretical questions related to multilingual proficiency. Among those focusing on assessment are chapters by Kok on the detection of item bias, by deBot on the use of self-assessments of minority language proficiency, and by Schils and Weltens on assessing foreign language proficiency loss.

The link between theories of language proficiency and assessment is established in most studies by using theory to guide choices about which dimensions of language proficiency to assess. Furthermore, there are a couple of valuable examples where the use of theory is taken a step further to help shape the form of assessment itself. For example, van der Leij and Smeets use computerized assessment procedures developed from theories of automaticity of visual word processing to study differences in reading performance between learning disabled and nondisabled readers. Another good example of using theory to shape the nature of assessment is provided by van Wijk who presents a Stepwise Test Analysis, which provides a system for analyzing the information, conceptual, and rhetorical structure of spontaneously produced written texts.

The book will appeal to researchers interested in theory-based assessments and to those interested in current issues and questions motivating research on language proficiency from a cross-disciplinary perspective.

It is concluded that alternative tests are needed if there is to be a fair appraisal of ALL students. Since it is quite likely that there is no perfect test for everyone, it is felt

that if standardized tests are improved, and if a fair-as-possible alternative assessment can be developed, the combination of both assessments would provide a more accurate appraisal of each student. It is further concluded that the seemingly increasing use of student portfolios adds to the need for alternative assessment.

Implications

1. Educators must set their sights on goals that will enable all students to become happy and productive citizens, so essential in a democracy. Goals which seem to be in keeping with present job requirements are problem finding, problem solving, literacy, self-respect and respect for others, and should be shared by all teachers.

2. Testing is felt necessary and should be in keeping with the goals set.

3. Assessment policy makers should include knowledgeable teachers with a strong humanitarian sense.

4. Teacher training institutions should bear their share of training teachers in all aspects of portfolio programs including testing.

5. The use of test results to compare schools is questionable.

6. Sufficient funding to solve the alternative testing problem should be given some consideration.

7. The use of technology in preparing the tests should be considered.

8. Educators should keep abreast of the research on alternative testing.

9. Mechanics are best taught in connection with the students' own compositions.

10. Students' sensitivities in regard to their writing should be respected.

11. Good teaching, which requires teacher-student interaction, is usually reflected in tests based on the goals set.

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